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### Kebab in theory: a treatise on political vision

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Issue 18. Thinking Pictures

## Kebab in Theory: A Treatise on Political Vision

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**Abstract (E):** This article presents a case study of the thinking image, by way of performing a close reading of David Goss's modern still life painting titled *Lebanese Kebab*. The oil on wood painting calls, on the one hand, for an iconographical interpretation, but at the same time it resists any simple reading of its subject matter or form. Locating itself between the discourses of art history, cartography, and contemporary Israeli society, the painting articulates the social imaginary of the Israeli subject and turns the gaze back to face its beholder. The painting's "thinking" takes place when it moves between knowledge paradigms and theorizes the instabilities of visual, categorical, and political perception.

**Abstract (F):** Cet article se penche sur un exemple précis d'image pensive, en proposant une microlecture de *Lebanese kebab* (Kébab libanais), une nature morte contemporaine de David Goss. Cette peinture à l'huile sur bois se prête à une interprétation iconographique, tout en y résistant fortement. L'oeuvre se rattache à de nombreux discours sur l'histoire de l'art, la cartographie et la société israélienne contemporaine, et elle retourne le regard de son spectateur. L'oeuvre "pense" au moment où elle se déplace entre plusieurs paradigmes de savoir et théorise les instabilités de nos catégories de perception visuelles, catégorielles et politiques.

**keywords:** Still life, genre, Israeli identity construction, maps

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## Article

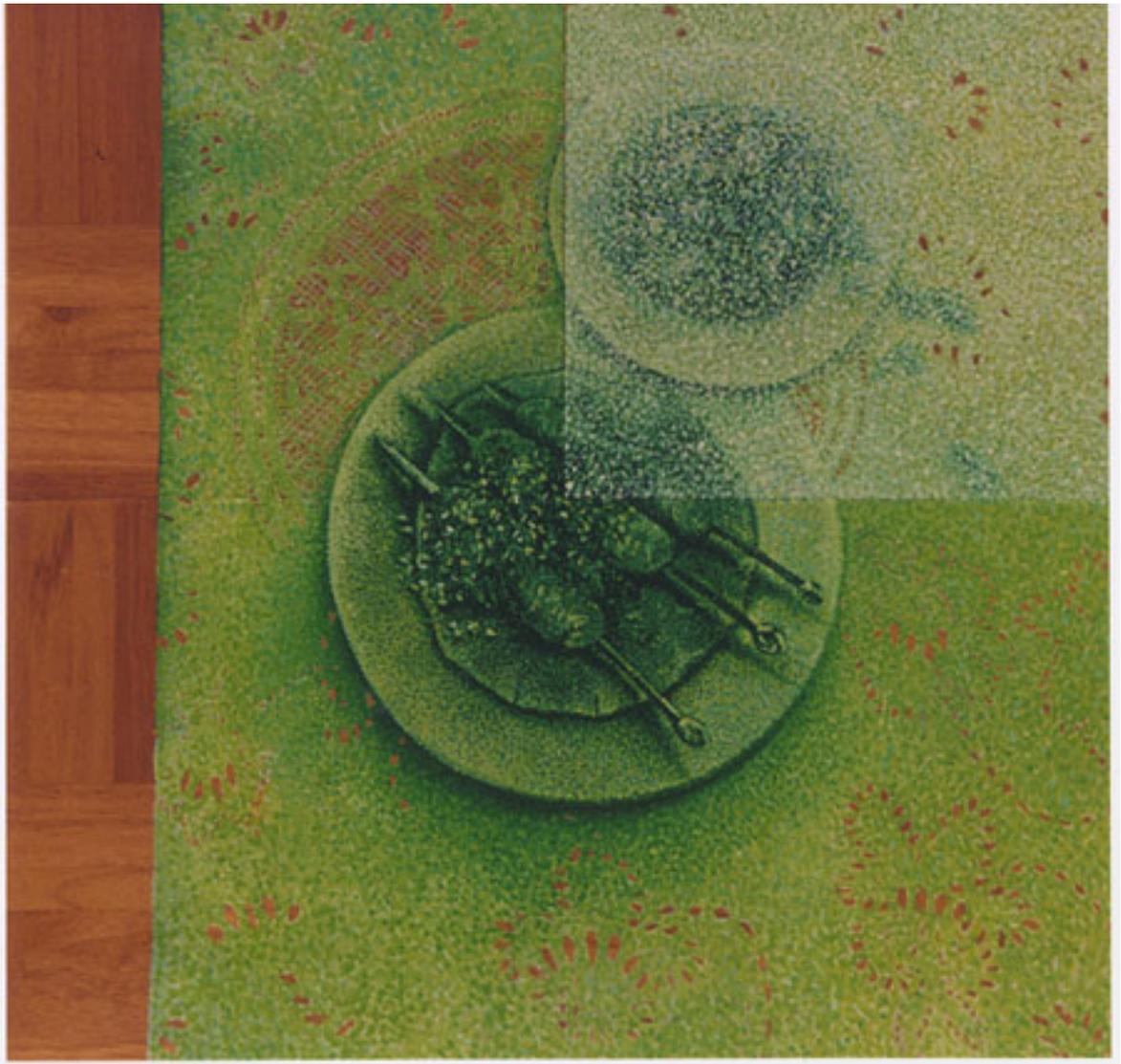


Fig. 1 David Goss. *Lebanese Kebab*. 60 \* 60 cm, oil on Parquet wood, 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

What are the consequences of considering paintings as visual modes of thought? Following Ernst van Alphen (2005), intellectual aesthetics may have an impact on cultural and social conceptions. Artworks, Van Alphen explains, do not simply thematize social or cultural issues. They participate and intervene in the cultural matrix in which they are created and displayed. Their potential lies in their ability to offer an alternative to positive understanding. Following Theodor Adorno, Christoph Menke and Hubert Damisch in this respect, van Alphen argues that the crucial function of aesthetic thought is to confront viewers with basic questions and conventional assumptions (xvi). The thinking image, accordingly, is that which stages thought not as a means, but as a valued process in itself. The constant regression that a thinking image generates could lead us viewers into a complex process of rethinking "issues we live by but that, precisely for that reason, we cannot know" (9). In fact, according to van Alphen, the ability to present what habitually escapes our cognition is the force that attracts viewers to artworks in the first place.

In this article I will make a case for the thinking image as an image that performs regressive - yet productive - contemplations. I will do so by conducting a close reading of *Lebanese Kebab*

(1998; figure 1), an oil-on-wood painting by Israel-based artist David Goss. Following van Alphen's conception of the thinking image as an active agent in the social field, I will argue that *Lebanese Kebab*'s thinking resides in its reflection upon traditions of visual recognition patterns, and in the way it theorizes the shortcomings and instabilities of visual, spatial, and political perception. The painting contends with the discourses of art history, cartography, and national politics, and while it refers to a rapidly changing contemporary reality, it remains theoretically relevant due to its reflective character.

The painting is a part of a series entitled "Table Maps", and encompasses many of the theoretical explorations that are manifested in much of Goss' oeuvre. While the span of this article cannot do justice to the artist's overall project, this single image will serve as an example for an artwork that remains forever mobile, investigative, and full of doubt - a thinking image *par excellence*.

## Questioning Vision, Questioning Knowledge

The relation between vision and knowledge has been strong throughout the history of thought. Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes* (1994), a book dedicated to outlining the relation between knowledge and vision, makes this point explicit in its opening paragraph, which contains more than twenty words that stem from the realm of vision. If we indeed envision knowledge in predominantly visual terms, then vision might be the right place to start and rethink basic epistemological conceptions. David Goss's *Lebanese Kebab* follows this line of thought, when it problematizes the relation between knowledge and vision by confounding interpretative visual cues from different styles of painting.

*Lebanese Kebab* depicts a plate with pita bread, three kebab sticks topped with sauce, laying on a flat surface at the centre of a square composition. Coloured in a grainy green monochrome, the plate is portrayed from a bird's eye view. The flat, decorated background that covers most of the wooden base is processed in a similar tone of intense green. A film of white dots partly covers the top-right quarter of the image, and eliminates potential mimetic qualities of the second, smaller circle that it covers. A segment of the wooden base along the left edge of the painting is left bare.

The title of this painting, *Lebanese Kebab*, along with the painting's naturalistic features, solicits an iconographic interpretation. Such an interpretation would identify the decorative green background of *Lebanese Kebab* as a flattened representation of a tablecloth, and the bare wooden base to its left as a segment of a wooden floor, next to the table. However, the painting's formal elements - colour, perspective, and composition - complicate this simple iconographical description. They refuse a consistent identification of objects and events, and result in a dynamic process of negotiation between various contradicting possible interpretations.

First, despite the apparent obviousness of the subject matter, the flatness of *Lebanese Kebab* conjures an abstract reading, of a geometrical game of the balance between shapes and tones. The geometrical shapes do not completely correspond to the figurative ones and create coloured layers that have an independent visual existence. For example, the top-right square of white coat partially covers both circular shapes, and effaces the faint depth cues as well as a clear outline of the "food plates". The painting thus alludes to the Abstract Expressionist

movement in its encouragement of a non-figurative reading that negates a reference to a material origin.

Second, the intense green monochrome separates the represented objects from their material appearance, by grounding the image in a fantastic world of artifice. The kebab plate in front of us, so meticulously rendered, clearly follows a real-life model; simultaneously, it does not faithfully represent a specific plate of food. Its reality exists inside the painting, as the processing of colour and texture directs attention to the artist's toil, and to the materiality of canvas and paint. In fact, we could say with Foucault, *ceci n'est pas un kebab*. By way of stressing its aesthetic qualities rather than its representational ones, *Lebanese Kebab* gives an account of the still life genre as *presentation* (Bryson, 1990:80), and takes an additional step away from the represented object to remain closer to an internal art-historical discourse.

Third, *Lebanese Kebab* combines flatness and closeness with the perspective of a bird's eye view, and consequently positions the viewer directly above the table, as an eye floating in the air. The table and its contents are translated into a flattened, abstract representation of reality. The bird's eye view, usually distant and disembodied, in combination with an intimate closeness to the depicted object, unsettles a sense of location and balance. As a three-dimensional variation of a *trompe l'oeil*, the painting "provokes our eyes to the point of insult, and of doubt: the deceit undermines our reliance on our perception" (Grootenboer 2005:5). *Lebanese Kebab* undermines the reliance on visual perception as a tool to locate oneself in the world, and in so doing, underscores the usually unacknowledged relation between perspective and point of view. What we see remains unstable; where we see it from does not stabilize at any given point either.

The green monochrome, the flattened perspective and the geometrical composition of *Lebanese Kebab* destabilize an iconographical reading of the image as a representation of kebab. The painting conjures several simultaneous modes of looking: the represented object is both lifelike in shape and fantastically coloured; the position of the viewer shifts between pragmatic and imaginary points of view; and the task of perception and interpretation alternates between descriptive, representational and geometrical analysis. Yet, an iconographical interpretation is not cancelled out, since the kebab plate still inhabits the processed image. No one single reading is satisfactory, and the attempt at an interpretation à la-Panofsky turns instead into a "tireless process that does not lead to interpretation, but to a process of thinking", thought provoking in its refusal to reveal a clear meaning or truth about its being (Grootenboer, 2005:158). Multiple readings are thus encouraged in a way that does not allow a subsequent deterministic analysis. The painting's textural allusion to the test for colour blindness is a final, sarcastic pun on this matter.

## Shaping emplacement

Confusion and perceptual tension are certainly not new tools to the genre of still life. In fact, a number of different writers have theorized the genre as a visual method of criticism. Subject matter, composition, perspective and frame operate in still lifes to raise questions about the truth in painting (Stoichita 1997, Grootenboer 2005), the naturalness of vision (Alpers 1983), and the objectivity of perception (Bryson 1990). They systematically call for an analysis that

problematizes the "automatic" level of recognition. In this light, it would seem, *Lebanese Kebab* follows a tradition, and offers no new theoretical perspective.

However, the innovative twist of *Lebanese Kebab* lies in the fact that it employs its formal elements to ground its criticism in a specific social setting. Indeed, the same aspects that complicate a simple recognition of subject matter - colour, composition, and perspective - evoke various possible social interpretations as well. While the title "Lebanese Kebab" resembles typical headings of still lifes in its clear descriptive quality (such as "Apples" or "Basket of Fruit"), it locates the kebab culturally, geographically and politically. The title's national aspect, together with the image's bird's eye view, links the painting's geometrical games of colour and shape to colour fields on the geo-political map, and turns the kebab into a symbolic shape of the state of Lebanon.

But while geo-political descriptions of space are typically part of the endeavour to create a coherent concept of the national subject (Anderson, 1991: 170-178), in *Lebanese Kebab* the pseudo-cartographical description of space seems to fracture the subject that it shapes. The white film that covers the top-right quarter of the painting cuts into and disrupts the description of the kebab plate. It calls attention to the effect that arbitrary division of space may have on organic or tangible shapes. With regards to the painting's title, the image seems to hint at the Lebanese grounds and people that were affected by the constant transgression of Lebanon's southern border.

The state of affairs between Lebanon and Israel will not receive a thorough introduction in the scope of this paper. *Lebanese Kebab* was completed long before the recent war of Israel and the Hezbollah on Lebanese grounds in the summer of 2006, but also before Israel's retreat from southern Lebanon in 2000. The painting remains relevant in the light of the dramatic political changes in the area, due to the fact that it does not contemplate a specific state of affairs, but rather, reconsiders the basic premises of nationally framed vision. The vision that it frames is, interestingly enough, not Lebanese. In fact, and quite emphatically, the questions that *Lebanese Kebab* raises in regards to national border delineations are framed from - and for - the viewpoint of an Israeli beholder.

First, the pervasiveness of the green colour positions the image in a specific political controversy, by hinting at the notion of "the Green Line" - the 1949 armistice lines established between Israel and its opponents, which included Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. The Green Line constitutes the de-facto borders of pre-1967 Israel and separates it from the occupied Palestinian (and, until recently, Lebanese) territories, which are under Israeli military control. It remains a crucial issue in peace process debates. If we accept Benedict Anderson's definition of the unambiguous boundaries of a nation-state on a map as the "logo of the nation" (Anderson, 1983: 175), then it follows that in the case of Israel, Israeli identity is still in the process of being established, and that the green line is the emblem around which national identity struggles are taking place. The green line and the territorial and ideational struggles that are connected to it impose themselves on the painting *Lebanese Kebab*. More than an imprint on identity, they become key devices in constituting the subject, filters through which the (nationally-identified) subject perceives the world.

Second, the target-like composition and the extensive deployment of an intense green colour in *Lebanese Kebab* obviously associate the image with military power. During the first Gulf war in Iraq, and more recently, the second Israel-Lebanon war, footage of night combat was regularly seen on TV and on the Internet. Such footage covers the entire screen with

fluorescent green. *Lebanese Kebab*'s composition - circle in the middle of a square cross - and colour - pervasive, forceful green monochrome - allude to such images, and thus conjure associations of night vision goggles used in military action. The kebab plate, positioned on the centre of a square cross, turns into the target and future victim of this military weapon-like vision. The mapped land of *Lebanese Kebab* is thus covered with the colour and shape of combat. The green line is fused with green night-vision goggles, and the nationally framed vision of the Israeli beholder is identified as a militarized point of view.

Certainly, the reference to Lebanon in the title *Lebanese Kebab* is as much connected with a highly praised culinary culture as with notions of national geography, occupation, and war. Many Israeli restaurants pride themselves on having a Lebanese cultural atmosphere, expressed in homeliness, hospitality, and delicious aroma. These nostalgic and inviting notions of Lebanese culture are detached, in the minds of most Israelis, from the political connotations of Lebanon the state, and the troubled history of its relation with Israel. However, the bird's eye view on the kebab plate, as well as the geometrical shapes created through the arbitrary colour fields, enhances a territorial reading of the kebab's cultural identity. They bring up the tacit correlation between a desired cuisine and its feared geographical roots, and locate the spectator's gaze not in the interior of a household, but above a demarcated terrain.

And so, while the intense tone of green, the flattened perspective, and the geometrical game of balance in *Lebanese Kebab* engage us in an experience of optical amusement on the one hand, they evoke visual imagery related to contemporary politics on the other. The former line of thought raises doubts about what we see in the oil painting, the latter connects this to a suspicion towards how we construct cultural and national identity. To name the kebab *Lebanese*, or, for that matter, to know oneself as *Israeli*: both are acts that engender national subjects and subjectivities, as much as they describe them. The painting thus brings the absurdism of national delineation to the fore. Its strength lies in its ability to mingle visual and social criticism; to question the act of interpretation in relation to images as well as to social and political realities.

## Still Lives, Maps, and Failed Expectations

*Lebanese Kebab* calls attention to the volatile nature of conceptual boundaries. The painting directs its critique towards both perception, as it remains inconclusive in regards to its artistic style, and politics, as it reflects on the ephemeral quality of the geography of the Israeli-Lebanese border. This final section will present a third layer of doubt, as the painting's engagement with still life traditions further undermines a confident interpretation. The painting thus extends its ambiguities concerning vision - what do we see, where do we see it from - and politics - what is our subject position, how does it determine our vision - to the domain of categories - how should we begin to approach an image.

As we have seen, *Lebanese Kebab* refers simultaneously to two visual discourses: the art historical still life genre, and cartography. The painting as well as the entire "Table Maps" series to which it belongs feature inanimate objects as their subject matter, and thus can be easily categorized as modern still lifes. The titles of the paintings in the series, such as *Black*

*Olives* (1998), *Turkish Coffee* (1999) or, for that matter, *Lebanese Kebab*, fit in the tradition of the still life genre as well. At the same time, the bird's eye view and the flattened, geometrical composition allude to aerial photography and topographical maps, and situate the artworks within the category of cartography.

When we identify *Lebanese Kebab* as a still life, we are bound to interpret the image in the framework of the genre and its history. Naturally there are many variations of interpretative approaches to still lifes, but their connecting thread is the presence of contradiction and ambiguities. The notion of conflict, or paradox, seems to be constitutive of the genre. *Lebanese Kebab* contains such paradoxes, and in this sense closely follows the genre's tradition. It confuses elements of "high art", such as oil paint and meticulous performance, with the "low art" choice to depict banal objects of consumption from everyday life. It is rendered on a base of wood, which recalls sacred iconic paintings from the past, but also ordinary profane wooden floors, since the wood used is meant for parquet. In addition, and not unlike other contemporary still life paintings, *Lebanese Kebab* follows Norman Bryson's well-known social analysis of the genre (1990) when it introduces politically tainted subject matter to the historical genre frame. In its emphatically grounded relation to contemporary society, the painting places the paradoxes inherent to the genre in current cultural struggles. And yet, the image remains contemplative, distant from the heat of the cultural struggles it refers to.

When we identify, alternatively, the image as an abstract map, what comes to the fore rather than paradoxes, is the quest for knowledge. According to Svetlana Alpers (1983), this quest resides in the still life genre as well: during the Dutch Golden age, when genre paintings flourished, maps and paintings were both part of a *mapping impulse*. They were both experiences of empirical observations on vision, joined in their desire to map out the world and obtain descriptive knowledge (Alpers, 1983:119). Plainly speaking, maps make it possible to see phenomena that are not available to direct seeing. They are immediately both visible and readable, and function as image-indexes (Buci-Glucksmann, 2004). The descriptive knowledge that they provide, however, is always motivated, for maps survey and inscribe territories in order to take possession of them. The desire for knowledge inherent to the map is primarily an instrument of competition for economic advantage and power (Frieling, 2004; Crampton, 2001), and Alpers too acknowledges at times the political undercurrents of the mapping impulse in the seventeenth century. Clearly, *Lebanese Kebab* does not describe a specific geographical area. The map that it forms through shapes and colours is wholly fantastic and generic. What is left from the area map is only the *idea* of Alpers' mapping impulse: the endeavour to describe space in a coherent way. The resulting conceptual map reflects on the kind of knowledge that the mapping impulse engenders, and on the kind of desire that maps are meant to serve.

Genres are meditative tools that provide viewers with frames of references that help them to identify and interpret texts (Chandler 1997). Categories can be seen in much the same light, as they lead to a pre-visual identification and provide a setting that effects the interpretation of images. But clearly, genres and categories are not innocuous practical tools, as they involve relations of power and class, and affect the construction of the subject alongside the interpretation of a work (Derrida 1980; Bennett 1990; Hitchcock 2003). When Goss intermingles two modes of description - the still life and the map - in a single image, he once more prevents the painting from being interpreted through a single reference frame. The fused image casts further doubts about the naturalness of the viewer's perception, as it discloses underlying visual strategies that lay at the base of each genre or category alone.

*Lebanese Kebab* collides two fields of expectations: the one emphasizes symbolic paradoxes and ambiguities; the other underscores a desire for positive, descriptive knowledge. This collision, together with the political specificity of the painting's subject matter, affects the way the image lends itself to interpretation. First, a map as a still life generates a more aware and reflexive approach towards its own paradoxes. The concept of a map is, indeed, inherently paradoxical, as it clarifies by means of distortion. Maps on a scale of 1:1 have been useful only for literary texts, such as Lewis Carroll's "Silvie and Bruno" (1893) or Umberto Eco's "On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1" (1994). The problematical aspect of the map's distortion lies in the effect it has on the perception of the territory that it maps. The union of the still life and the map underscores this predicament. The map is here put on the table, as part of the "self-awareness" of the still life image (Stoichita, 1997), and therefore accommodates a reflection on the elusive distortion inherent to the meta-structure of mapping the world, alongside its incessant desire to grasp that world.

Second, a closer look reveals that *Lebanese Kebab* offers the map, instead of the kebab, as the object *under* scientific scrutiny, seeing as there is also an actual depiction of an abstracted *table map* in the image. A "table map" is the Hebrew expression for tablecloth. The tablecloth-map is indicated by the ornamented decorations on the green background, and by the transition from that background to the bare wood, which translates to a wooden table. The title of the series, "Table Maps", further complicates the subject matter. The painting's title presents us with a plate of food, but the series' title effaces that plate and presents the tablecloth-map as its main concern. As a result of this confusion, the mapping impulse turns its investigative gaze towards the still life image as such. In its attempt to map out the table, the map envelops its object, defies a disinterested audience, and reinstates desire for power into the genre of still life. It brings out, and updates, Alpers' mapping impulse in a still life image that belongs to a specific social and political reality.

Moreover, the tension between the distant gaze of an area map and the intimate closeness to objects on a tablecloth-map underscores the impossibility of discerning it all at once. Each category demands a different tuning of our gaze, and whichever knowledgeable framework we choose to look from, each time, we cannot wholly familiarize ourselves with the subject of the map. This categorical impossibility is inherently related to the painting's political layer. It sketches the impossible desire of the Israeli subject to intimately belong to - and at the same time control - its geo-political neighbours in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

*Lebanese Kebab* has been shown to be an instance of visual thought, inasmuch as it reflects on the act of overlooking that is inherent to the impulse of knowing as such. The contemplations it calls for are regressive and circular, as they return each time to question the most basic premises of vision, perception, and knowledge. Instead of reflecting a certain visual tradition, the painting reflects *upon* traditions of visual and categorical recognition patterns, and so theorizes the indirect essence of perception, and its dependency on predetermined knowledge.

The painting contains multiple contexts and paradoxes within its frame, and relates to art

historical debates as much as it does to political ones. Its aesthetic, theoretical and political layers cannot be simply distilled. Each refers back to the other and the result is a complex configuration of content and form, leading to multifaceted reflection on the part of the viewer with regards to the impossibility of conquering knowledge. By way of intermingling the still life and the mapping view, the painting brings up tensions that extend beyond the expected theoretical scope of the genre, and then reflects those tensions onto the social imaginary of a contemporary political society. It engages with the mapping impulse that is tacit in both traditional still life paintings and the contemporary Israeli psyche.

Nevertheless, *Lebanese Kebab* does not compel a critical reading; it does not aspire to reveal the overlooked to a reluctant audience. Instead, as a thinking image, *Lebanese Kebab* reflects together with a willing viewer on the blindness and distortion inherent to perception. In the course of this reflective process, the painting is "able to make present that which withdraws from our cognitive power" (van Alphen, 2005:9), as it rethinks the naturalized and politically inflicted truths, rooted at the base of perception and understanding.

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